

Brabant killers

The **Brabant killers** ("*De Bende van Nijvel*") " are thought to be responsible for a series of violent attacks that mainly occurred in the province of **Brabant**, Belgium between 1982 and 1985, in which 28 people died and 40 were injured. It became the country's most notorious unsolved crime spree.

The gang's trademark was disproportionate and gratuitous violence in crimes for relatively petty rewards, and insouciance about police response. There have been many speculative theories about the case. Although the perpetrators may have been a particularly psychopathic group of criminals without any ulterior motive, a recently revived line of enquiry followed up assertions that a politically extreme paramilitary group were sent on an undercover reconnaissance exercise that involved checking on the security of some of the supermarkets targeted in the raids. According to various witnesses, the gang was composed of three recurring actual participants on the raids, assisted by a number of others who supplied logistical support and gathered information on targeted businesses. The three most active robbers were commonly called:

- the *Giant* a very tall man who may have been the leader
- the *Killer* who shot most of the gang's victims
- the *Old Man* who mainly acted as driver.

The identity and the whereabouts of the killers remain unknown though one is thought to have been fatally wounded in the last raid. Failure to catch the gang was a major source of the dissatisfaction that led to reform of Belgian police.

1 Overview of crimes attributed to the gang

1.1 1982

- March 13: sneak theft of a 10 gauge fowling shotgun at a retail store in **Dinant**, Belgium. Two men seen running away.
- May 10 Armed robbery of an Austin Allegro.
- May 10 Volkswagen Santana stolen from car showroom

- August 14: armed robbery of a grocery store in **Maubeuge**, France. Food and wine being loaded when Gendarmerie-officers arrived, both are shot and seriously wounded.
- September 30: armed robbery of a weapons dealer in **Wavre**, Belgium. Fifteen firearms were stolen, including sub-machine guns. A policeman was killed at the scene, two others shot and seriously wounded in later incident after police car blocking escape is rammed.
- December 23: armed robbery of a isolated restaurant in **Beersel**, Belgium. Coffee and wine were stolen. The caretaker was tortured and killed.^[1]

1.2 1983

- January 9: robbery of a cab in **Brussels**. The car was found in **Mons**, Belgium. The taxi driver was tortured and killed.
- February 11: armed robbery of a supermarket in **Rixensart**, Belgium. Less than \$18,000.00 was stolen. No people killed, several wounded.
- February 22. An Audi 100 with multiple bullet holes inflicted in the raid on 11 February is singled out and stolen from a commercial garage where it is for repair.
- February 25: armed robbery of a supermarket in **Uccle**, Belgium. Less than \$16,000.00 was stolen. No people killed.
- March 3: armed robbery of a supermarket in **Halle, Belgium**. Less than \$18,000.00 was stolen. One staff member was killed. Audi left in street.
- May 7: armed robbery of a supermarket in **Houdeng-Gougnies**, Belgium. Less than \$22,000.00 was stolen. No people killed.
- September 10: armed robbery of a textile factory in **Temse**, Belgium. Seven bullet-proof jackets were stolen. One worker was killed, his wife severely wounded.
- September 17: A couple who stopped at 24 hour self service petrol station after midnight in **Nivelles** are killed, who were breaking into an adjacent grocery store. They used a cutting torch to enter store and

steal 20 kilos of tea and coffee and 10 liters of cooking oil, which they took the time to load even after the alarm went off. A couple of Gendarmerie responded, and were shot as they arrived. One was killed, another seriously wounded. The gang escaped in a Saab turbo and couple's Mercedes, later staging an ambush of a police car.

- October 2: armed robbery of a restaurant in **Ohain**, Belgium. Nothing was stolen. The owner was killed.
- October 7: armed robbery of a supermarket in **Beersel**, Belgium. Less than \$35,000.00 was stolen. One customer was killed.
- December 1: armed robbery of a jeweller in **Anderlues**, Belgium. Some low-value jewels were stolen. Two people were killed.

1.3 1985

Friday September 27, approximately 20:00: armed robbery and a killing in the **Delhaize** supermarket on rue de la Gaignette in **Braine-l'Alleud**. Less than \$6,000.00 was stolen. Three people were killed, two people wounded. Approximately 15 to 25 minutes later the **Delhaize** supermarket on Brusselsesteenweg in **Overijse** was raided. Less than \$25,000.00 was stolen. Five people were killed, one person wounded. As a result there were security measures included stationing armed guards at many premises in the region.^[1]

1.3.1 Final raid

On Saturday November 9, after no raids in two years, the gang reappeared. At approximately 19:30 there was an armed robbery in the **Delhaize** supermarket on Parklaan in **Aalst**, which was out of the gangs normal area, and had no permanent guards though police patrols were checking ever 20 minutes. Less than \$25,000.00 was stolen. Eight people were killed. In the supermarket gang members, who were wearing bizarre face paint disguises, roared at customers that they had looked at them to justify the shooting, but it appeared to be wholly gratuitous and mainly by the 'killer', who was armed with a shotgun. The robbers were slow to leave the scene after returning to their parked getaway vehicle although there were only two exits and they could easily have been trapped. Patrol vehicles had arrived before the gang left, but most went to a second exit of the car park 100 yards away from the one the getaway was eventually made though. One walked beside the car. A policeman approached the ramp to the car part and returned fire with a revolver at a member of the gang from 30 meters, and again as the getaway car sped away. A police van followed for half a kilometer before halting the pursuit. The last sighting came that night when the gang, one of whom was apparently dead or seriously injured, was spotted at a fork in a

forest road. Decades later police made a close investigation of the spot and found evidence of a weapon being fired, leading to a belief among investigators that one, possibly the leader, was finished off by his accomplices and buried in the forest. The getaway car was later found burnt out.^{[1][2][3]}

2 Method of operation

Some paraphernalia found by police indicated the gang were professional criminals involved in drugs and burglaries, but many puzzlingly irrational elements were also apparent. Proceeds from the robberies were modest relative to the extreme risks they ran and murders drew investigative resources, although the killings made many police cautious about engaging the gang. The killings escalated dramatically during the 1985 robberies. Bystanders were shot dead in the car park before the gang even entered the supermarkets and other victims, including children, were shot from as close as a foot away while cowering on the floor, which seemed to indicate that killing had become an end in itself. Firearms were a particular interest of the gang and the 12 gauge pump shotguns used were loaded with a rare specialist heavy buckshot. Cars used, often Volkswagens, were stripped of distinctive aspects of the trim, and modifications showed a mechanic's expertise. The driver was highly skilled, and getaways were by quick but non-obvious routes, often to forested areas where cars used were burnt out. The gang is believed to have had at least one helper on the last raid.^{[1][3][4]}

3 Ulterior motives

3.1 Official complicity

The last attack when the gang struck despite patrols checking the supermarket every twenty minutes led to rumours of them having some kind of inside knowledge and possibly complicity by individual Gendarmerie in the attacks. Gendarmerie vehicles (which had an Uzi in a compartment) were present approximately 100 meters away, but failed to engage the gang, or pursue. The Belgian "stay-behind" network **SDRA8** (Gladio) — operating as a secret branch of the **Belgian military service** was suggested by some to have links to the gang. Some units of the stay behind network were made up of members of the Belgian Gendarmerie. One theory was that the **communist threat in Western Europe** was taken as justifying **Operation Gladio** being activated. However, the Belgian parliamentary inquiry into Gladio found no substantive evidence that Gladio was involved in any terrorist acts or that criminal groups had infiltrated the stay-behind network.^{[5][6]} The Belgian Gendarmerie were abolished in reforms that came as a result of a perceived lack of satisfactory performance in the Brabant killers case, and

that of Marc Dutroux.^{[2][7]}

3.2 Westland New Post

The NATO 'Stay Behind' explanation for the Brabant massacres was ostensibly explored in a 1992 BBC Time-watch series 'Operation Gladio' directed by Allan Francovich, but the program centered on a by then defunct small private Belgian far right anti-communist organization *Westland New Post* whose leader Paul Latinus had asserted that he was working with government agencies along the same lines as Gladio. Many people have regarded Laurius as likely to have fabricated contacts with secret government agencies to boost his prestige with WNP followers. The main connection to the Brabant killers was the WNP members including some Gendarmerie (former paramilitary police force), recalled being ordered in the early eighties to covertly surveil and compile a report on the security arrangements at various Belgian supermarkets, including ones of a large chain that was the main target of the later killings. However, WNP had one genuine intelligence operative advising on covert techniques, and NATO behind-the-lines units are known to have used the planning of robberies as a theoretical exercise for training.^{[8][9][10][10] [11][12]}

Michel Libert, the former no. 2 of *Westland New Post* has never denied passing on the orders to covertly assess supermarket security, though denying he had anything more to with the matter, which was out of his sphere of responsibility. He insisted that he was not told by WNP's leader, the late Paul Latinus, what if any purpose was behind the assignments.^{[9][10][10] [11][13][14][15] [15][16]}

In 1983 Libert had been staying with Marcel Barbier, a WNP member, when he was arrested for using a weapon in a street fight and became suspected of a double murder at a synagogue a year earlier. When police then began investigating WNP, Latinus told them that Barbier and another WNP member were behind the synagogue murders, and that Latinus had helped Barbier getting rid of the murder weapon and other relevant evidence. Barbier was the only person convicted for these murders, his co-accused who was acquitted, but later convicted of a similar double murder of diamond merchants, appeared in a Belgian tv program in 2014, where he alleged WNP was behind the Brabant killings based on WNP apparently having compiled information on the premises raided. Libert was arrested as a suspect soon after the program was broadcast, but released without charge after 48 hours.^{[9][10][10] [11][13][14][15] [15][16]}

3.3 Other speculation

There are various complex conspiracy theories with links to political scandals that suggesting the killings were done to disguise a targeted assassination. In one version linking to illegal gun-running mafias and legitimate businesses

a banker Léon Finné, who was murdered in Overijse, was supposedly targeted deliberately. Notorious professional criminals including Patrick Haemers and Madani Bouhouche, both now deceased, have been seen as likely suspects. Haemers's height made him thought a fit for the 'giant' in the Brabant gang, but though Haemers was ruthless, his crimes lacked the irrational malevolence and small-time takings that were the Brabant killers' hallmark. Bouhouche who was convicted of two murders, had contacts with WNP and is regarded as a somewhat more likely suspect to have been involved.^[17]

4 Investigation

4.1 Early failures

In 1983, on the bases of a forensic examination of a weapon handed into police, and subsequent confessions of the owner of the gun, a number of men were charged of being the Brabant gang, and some implicated themselves and others under interrogation. However there was no collaboration of the confessions obtained and a lack of tangible evidence. The gang's Orhain raid happened while the accused men were in detention. It emerged that a German laboratory had concluded the pistol was not used in the robberies, and the charges were eventually dropped after the "Borains" had spent two years in custody.

Rivalry and lack of unified direction made the various law enforcement agencies hunting the gang ineffective during the crucial early years of the investigation when the gang made most of their raids and potentially vital evidence was found, including items believed to have the killers fingerprints that were destroyed or simply lost.^{[1][18]}

4.1.1 Current lines of inquiry

The weapons used in the killings, and others taken from victims, including police, were never found. One gang member's DNA profile has been established, but has not been matched. Many believe the case essentially unsolvable after 30 years, but the Brabant killers are still actively sought using considerable resources. There are no new leads publicized. Arrests for questioning, and offers of rewards for repentant gang members who provide information on accomplices, have in recent years been directed at decades-old suspects.^{[11][19]}

5 References

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- [4] Flanders Today, July 2015 Suspect arrested in 30-year-old Brabant Killers case
- [5] <http://www.senate.be/lexdocs/S0523/S05231297.pdf>
- [6] Permanent Committee for the Control of Intelligence Agencies (Belgium) See in particular the “history” section in the “Presentation” part.
- [7] Chronologie des faits attribués aux tueurs du Brabant page 21-22
- [8] Financial Times blog, May 10, 2013, Sir Ranulph Fiennes caught trying to rob a bank
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- [17] Faits divers - Ariège. Le bûcheron mort accidentellement près de Lavelanet était mêlé aux tueries du Brabant.
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- Belgian Senate, parliamentary investigation into Gladio. (French) (Dutch)
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- tueriesdubrabant.be/cx

6 External links

- Official website of police investigation
- Chronologie des faits attribués aux tueurs du Brabant page 21-22
- bendevannijvel.com/forum » Forum
- Belgian Chamber of Representatives, parliamentary investigation into the Brabant killers. (French) (Dutch)

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